

BY HOPE SAWYER BUYUKMIHCI

# The Prothonotary Warbler

**T**he prothonotary is a member of the wood warbler family, who flit like bright butterflies through the forests of the United States and Canada. There are 53 varieties of wood warblers. Only two of them nest in holes, and the prothonotary is the only one in the east to do so.

The prothonotary has a brilliant yellow head and body, with blue-gray wings and tail. The female is almost as brightly colored as the male. Their name comes from *protonotaria*, dignitaries who advise the people, and who wear rich yellow garments. At least legend has it so.

For years I had seen the male prothonotary feeding along our wooded stream—the brushy, swampy habitat he likes. I knew that he must be nesting in a hollow stub or woodpecker hole close to the water. I also knew that it would be almost impossible to find his nest along the tangled, muddy shore.

This spring, when once more he came rollicking upstream, singing his *sweet-sweet* notes, I had an idea. Why not put up a birdhouse within sight of a blind at Otter Dam, where I often sit to observe beavers and wood ducks? Perhaps photographers could even get pictures of this elusive bird. So, from my brother who makes bluebird houses, I ordered one made especially for the prothonotary. With the bottom cut off at an angle, the house could be mounted to jut like a dead limb over the stream.

The house arrived the first of



Photo by Ray Davis

**The prothonotary is the only wood warbler in the east to nest in a hole. We caught one with a camera.**

July, and Ray Davis, a wildlife photographer, placed it against the trunk of a cedar, where it was reflected in the water below. It was a bit late for this season's nesting, but we planned for the coming year. At last, prothonotary warblers nesting where we could watch them!

No sooner had we erected the nesting box, however, than we made a great discovery. On the way to Otter Dam sits a birdhouse close to the trail. In the past, chickadees or tufted titmice have nested there. One day Ray tapped lightly on the house to see if it was

occupied, expecting a chickadee or titmouse to emerge. To his surprise, out streaked a yellow bird who could only have been a prothonotary warbler. It was the female, and she was incubating four speckled eggs. A few days later two eggs hatched (the other two proved to be infertile) and the parent birds began to feed their young.

It took 11 days from hatching to fledging. During that time Ray photographed both male and female, and I spent hours daily sitting on a camp stool about 20 feet away, observing sight and sound of the feeding birds. They were faithful caretakers, arriving with insect food every ten to 20 minutes. The male flew directly to the entrance, paused with his beak in the door, his dark eye observing me intently, before going in. The female usually alighted in bushes behind the house and made her way around the side to the entrance. Often I heard the song of the male, a light musical sound in bursts of six notes—*sweet-sweet-sweet-sweet-sweet-sweet*. Only occasionally did he give a soft *chip* of alarm.

The house this pair chose is not ideally situated. Although in the brushy woods they like, it is quite far from water. Next year, however, they will have their choice of ideal nesting sites, for I've ordered two more custom-built houses to put on trees overhanging the stream. I look forward to welcoming more than one pair of these golden birds to the dark, wet woods along our stream. ■ ■